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Smuggling? Yes; collusion? No

Despite its full commitment to the fight against the narcotics trade, the CIA runs into continual accusations of engaging in the traffic itself.

The accusations center around Air America, an airline operating in Vietnam and Laos and into the "Golden Triangle" where 70 per cent of the world's illicit opium is produced.

It is an open secret that Air America was covertly established by the U.S. government to provide safe and adequate air services in a part of the world where commercial carriers provided neither.

The capital to start it was funneled through the CIA, which still serves as a funding mechanism for operating costs, but it is a semi-autonomous organization whose employees are all civilians under contract to the airline and not to the CIA or the U.S. government.

AIR AMERICA RUNS scheduled flights throughout Vietnam and Laos, and it is used by all manner of passengers with official travel orders.

In Laos, it is also used on a charter basis to support the irregular war effort against the North Vietnamese, transporting supplies, equipment and food as well as advisers and the Meo tribesmen and their families from hilltop airstrip to hilltop airstrip.

Throughout the "Golden Triangle" — which is beyond all formal administration, no matter what the lines on the map say — no currency has much value, and raw opium serves as the basis of what passes for an economy.

The CIA does not and never has paid its assets in it and does not and never has dealt in it. The tribesmen with whom the CIA works, however, do deal in it, and raw opium in small amounts has undoubtedly moved on Air America flights in the bundles of Meo personal possessions.

AIR AMERICA WILL stop this when it can, but it isn't easy. No U.S. airline, for example, has yet discovered how to prevent even shotguns from being smuggled aboard their flights. The problem is in any event inconsequential, since the amounts are small and des-

tinued for use only as currency in Meo village barter.

Far more serious is the problem of ranking Laotian diplomats and military notables who smuggle large quantities of opium and heroin out of Laos and into the world market.

The diplomats are immune to search when they travel, and an Air America employee — a resident alien in Laos — would be on a sticky wicket if he tried to search the luggage of a senior Laotian official in Laos itself.

The responsibility, moreover, is not that of the airline but of the customs service in the country of arrival. Here again, diplomatic luggage is immune to search, as are certain official aircraft used by the military, and a country that insists on an illegal search had better find what it is looking for.

THE JULY HARPER'S magazine features an extract from the forthcoming book "The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia," by Yale Ph.D. student Alfred McCoy. The extract starts with a detailed description of the arrival at Orly Airport in Paris on 25 April 1971 of Prince Sopsaisana, the new Laotian ambassador to France.

Despite the presence of a large reception party, the prince insisted on waiting for his numerous official suitcases like an ordinary tourist, and when they arrived he at once noticed one was missing. He angrily demanded that it be produced, but was forced to depart with the promise that it would be delivered to the Laotian embassy as soon as it was found.

The suitcase contained 132 pounds of pure heroin. France refused to accept Sopsaisana's credentials, and he had to return to Laos.

The gist of McCoy's article is that the drug trade in the "Golden Triangle" flourishes with CIA support. His argument runs:

● All the leading figures in Laos are deeply involved in the drug trade.

● The CIA works closely with many of these figures.

● Ergo, the CIA is supporting the drug trade.

While the first two statements are correct, the conclusion is not valid and is not borne out by any evidence.

McCoy might, for example, have asked who tipped the French government off to this particular shipment. Customs officials do not take it upon themselves to search an ambassador's luggage. Authority for that can only come from the highest levels, and takes days to arrange.

The Orly officials, moreover, knew precisely which suitcase to sequester. They removed the right piece of luggage and let the rest go in a matter of minutes, obviously before there had been any chance to search all of them. In short they had heard from Vietnamese exactly what to look for, and this tip did not come from the Laotian government.

The U.S. government, through the State Department and the CIA, is doing all it can to scotch the trade. The government of South Vietnam has had impressed on it that collusion between its customs officials and arriving smugglers is a serious matter, and it has arrested both its own citizens and halted and searched ranking foreigners.

In short, neither the CIA nor any other U.S. agency has ever deliberately engaged in, fostered or cast a deliberately blind eye on narcotics smuggling, although it has worked in other fields with officials who have been privately active in that one.

Raw opium has undoubtedly been transported on Air America flights in the past, but only as a private venture of a foreign passenger, and never with the connivance of an Air America employee. And the CIA has done what it can to prevent the use of Air America for such purposes.

The stories will no doubt continue, as long as there is a need for air services in Indochina, and as long as opium holds the peculiar place it does in the economy of that part of the world. But the stories must be seen in perspective, and in no way will they support the contention that the U.S. government, through the activities of the CIA, has deliberately furthered the international narcotics trade.